Pumpkinhead

Poems by Michele Hyatt-Blankman

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This book was prepared by Michele's sons Richard and Joshua. We read through the poems she's written and curated this book to be those about herself and our family.

We dedicate this book to both her and her husband Jon (our dad), who we know will find as much joy reading these poems as we have.

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The Metal Mannequin

I can no longer feel the breath of a summer breeze brush against my cheeks, soak in its warmth, or savor the scented gust of honeysuckle among rainbowed fields of wildflowers. I can no longer feel the softness of a newborn's skin or a puppy's fur. It's all gone now.

My brain's a motherboard, my life's stories stored on a memory card. I no longer imagine clusters of clouds as faces or places I wish I could live. My thoughts and dreams are stored on a hard drive. I don't drift off to sleep anymore. I am shut down and restarted nightly.

I run on power but am not empowered, have video but cannot see, have ears but cannot hear. I am nothing. Just a metal mannequin of humanity, what's left of a world that's whirled much too far too fast toward a a future where no one can live, just exist.

Icing on the Cake

The room once dim, now lavishly lit with happy tears
and hugs crossing borders drawn by outsiders in shades of hate,
here in the warmth of safety, vibrant with family of friends,
celebrating the life of two meant to be one.

It'd been a long road, paved with taunts and tears,
legal walls with no footholds, running in mazes
with no exits, racing clocks in cars with spinning wheels
for a courthouse ceremony footnoted by forms and fees.

And now? Groom and groom in easy embraces,
guests who were lawyers where they'd lived, laborers here.
In this room, speaking languages without being mocked, sharing
love repulsed by many. Dish after succulent dish carefully planned,

served with personal flair, part of a life's plan of doing things right
in a world gone tragically wrong. The cake, a towering monument to love,
iced in snowy white, a topper shining "LOVE WINS," thickly dusted
with gold glitter, sparkling like fireflies that give life to a solemn sky.

My Mother Doesn't Live Here Anymore

Her brain is scavenged now by the scarab beetles
of Alzheimer's, leaving mom drifting into a starless
night, her sky blue eyes clouded, her words soft and

scrambled, anagrams on a page that can't be turned.
memories gnawed away…marathon games of Scrabble,
listening to Sinatra swing, gushing over old movie stars,

like the time she met Dick Powell. I wonder if those moments
are locked somewhere in the prison of her mind. Her land is
strange, her language foreign. She is a child, wanting a cookie

she cannot name or reach. Her rehab is her crib she cannot
escape, no matter how hard she tries. I leave her screams, leaving
bloodless stab wounds of a scalpel. The demon of disease stole

her brain, her body, but wears her face. She doesn't live here anymore.
She doesn't live anywhere. Not the mother I knew. And when the
darkness swallows the sun and her lids droop over her glazed eyes,
I kiss her goodbye, perhaps for the last time. Her midnight is unending.

She'll never know I was there but I will. I'll remember the smell of tea with
honey, the warm sheets that smelled like her, the cool fresh air on my face
as she sang with Sinatra…and I smile through my tears.

Pumpkinhead

Just didn't seem fair as a kid.
An adult head on a small body.
I was teased in the classroom,
pushed in the halls, jeers of
Pumpkinhead echoed against

the chambers of locker-lined
hallways. I'd sob in the bathroom
stall, wishing my life away, wondering
why my head couldn't be smaller, why
I couldn't be paper-doll pretty. The sun

never eclipsed the shadows of memory.
Not through college or graduate school,
not through marriage or kids. Not until
that day at the fair. Mermaids and
magicians, fairies and witches, a

fantasy world in the woods, children
with painted faces and fists stained with
rainbowed popcorn and cotton candy
frolicking among bubbles and butterflies
with glittery wings and a 7-foot man on stilts

weaving his way through the crowds.
And on a bench, a child, her eyes
downcast, shoulders stooped. Honey-
blonde hair, paper-doll pretty. What tears
could she could be swallowing? I held

back my own, walked past her. “I love
your hair!” She looked at me, smiled.
I offered her popcorn, bunched in
a wrapper in my hand. “No thank you,”
she said meekly. I wished her a good

day and walked away. A few moments
later, I saw her whisper to her mom and
dash over to a vendor to buy some popcorn.
After all those years, all those tears, I’d
found a purpose to being a Pumpkinhead.

Aunt Clara's Candy Store

Stomping stones into gravel
in my brand new Buster Browns,
I raced against my shadow
to Aunt Clara's candy store,
Mama's calls not to fall
or scuff my shoes
fading in the distance.

Aunt Clara squealed
and squeezed me like an orange
and told me how I'd grown.

As Mama's voice drew closer,
I hid among the daisies
on Aunt Clara's field-green dress.

And as they talked of births and deaths
and who had married whom,
Mama's scowl became a smile
as she handed me my penny.

Behind the glass were lemon drops
and licorice pipes
and Mary Janes and Dots
and candies strung on necklaces.
I could taste the sugar dust.

In the corner was a barrel
heaped with penny candy
and on top, a Tootsie Roll,
my treasure for today.

I held Mama's hand the whole way home.
And strolling down the walk,
we gazed at all the pretty daisies
like the ones on Aunt Clara's dress.

I'd chew the candy later
as slowly as I could,
let the chocolate soak my teeth,
and think about next Sunday,
the squeals and the squeezes,
but most of all my penny,
and Aunt Clara's candy store.

Museum of Lost Souls

She's always by the door
hunched in her chair
serenading no one,
braiding and unbraiding
her angel-white hair,
thick as rope,
fingers bent with age,
caressing each frayed
strand, humming,
locked in the prison of
her mind.
Down the hall past the
babel of crying outbursts
of pain that will not heal,
my mother in her own hell.
Her room stinks, her hair
dirty, damp, hanging in her face.
The mother who straightened
my brows with spit, picked fuzz
off my coat, checked to see if
my part was straight and
seams matched was now just
another forgotten artifact
in the museum of lost souls.
Her once-white teeth have yellowed
with age like an old photograph,
her value faded by time,
now just waiting among others
once treasured, vaulted
in darkness with food they won't
eat, people they don't know, family
who've drifted away, and staff too
busy to clean rooms that stink.

This is the museum of lost souls,
those once vibrant, treasured
by loving hands and minds
are stored out of view,
where the paintings of lives
have dried and peeled, revealing
empty caverns where spiders spin
beauty in the dusk of death.

Walls

I've walked these halls before,

seen the dimmed faces of those

born to die because they were "Juden."

Jews.

Time-tattered images of people

frozen in time, matted on walls

like cheap paper.

Flammable.

Disposable.

Eyes of the innocent open.

Eyes of the world shut.

Now I'm left wondering,

in a world once again

infested by

parasites of hate,

if this could ever happen

again.

We cannot forget

those who now live

only on walls.

An Accidental Vacation

Arms flailing, feet perched
on water-worn piling,
They soldier against
a stiff ocean breeze
in the Florida sun.

Cross-country cousins,
now young men.
Boyish antics, long abandoned, now reclaimed
in laughter, dares, and fist bumps.

Paradise of play fades into sunset.
The funeral would soon begin
Time to race inside, fix ties,
buff shoes, gel hair.

Joy slips in a window.
A cocked cap, goofy smile,
a quick nudge that goes unnoticed.

When the funeral's over
and parting words are said,
the cousins must leave behind
golden moments untethered by age.
A sad occasion, an accidental vacation.

Cap-sized

A ten-gallon hat on 20-gallon head
was never meant to be.

Everyone in Texas, the big and brawny,
the tall and scrawny, wore straw hats,

the ones cowboys tipped with every "Ma'am"
and never left John Wayne's head in a brawl.

"One size fits all," the labels read,
but not for me, not for my head.

In a state brimming with hats,
my head was big and bare.

My wedding veil was two yards netting,
No mortarboard to toss in the air.

Bathing caps squeezed my skull
like an overpacked suitcase.

Shower caps leave my hair drenched
at the ends that cannot be covered.

I never wore a winter cap, even ones that stretched,
and baseball hats struck out more than three times.

But a cowboy hat? A hatless head in a field
of hatted heads hurt the worst.

They say "Everything's bigger in Texas."
Texas never saw my head.

My Name Is Miriam

A world of dreams imploded by age
My mirrored face gazes back at me.
Summers of buttercups would soon be over,
The sweet taste of life, too, would wane.
This is the sum of me, I thought.
This is who I am,
But who am I really?

My name is Miriam.

No one calls me that.
Miriam exists no more,
Her story like so many others
Fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers
Their lives in trinkets and candles
and clothes edged in lace,
All that make a house a home
looted and littered with shards of glass,
photos and papers shredded and burned,
nothing left to share
no one left to share it.
Ghosts of children, too.
A one-armed bear matted with drool.
A crinkled Monopoly board, pieces lost.
Stick-figured cats on wrinkled paper.

And Miriam, like so many others,
robbed of strength and spirit,
No way to stand, nowhere to go.
Mired in the mud where life used to be.

Where men toiled
and women cooked
and children giggled
and lovers kissed
and teachers taught
and rabbis chanted

Burning embers are all that remain
where skeletal villages are living graves,
spit on by brown-shirted boys, barely men,
air thick with the stench of the dying, the dead.

A fortunate few able to flee,
Jammed in a barge destined for dreams
In America

Among the chattel, my grandmother,
Miriam's sister,
Her dress so lovingly stitched,
Now stained and grimy,
Sagging on her four-foot frame
So tiny against this monster war
That had choked her childhood,
And in its wake, sweet Miriam.

In this barge prison, my grandmother
masking pain and loss,
Like so many others on the boat that day,
headed in fear for freedom
hanging onto a frayed rope of hope
through fickle waters,
hearts pounding with each ocean wave.
Like others, she cries and no one hears,
should hear,
but Miriam.

My grandmother,
Packing her pain what little was left
As she headed for the boat that day
Her small carpet pouch filled
With photos, maybe a coin or two
From her beloved Austria.

Dreams of freedom mixed with fear
No family waiting,
to yell, "Here I am!"
No shoulder to cry on.
No aunt or uncle or friend to say,
"Cry on if you want, cry if you must,"
Her tears invisible. No one must know.

My grandmother,
so small and frail at seventeen.
Her high-top shoes,
Scuffed with dirt and wear.
What would her mother say?

She shudders.
Her mother gone. Her father, too.
Nine brothers and sisters left behind.
in distant snaking smoke.

And Miriam
Her sister, her confidante
Her anchor to life itself.
Where was she?
Her dear, sweet Miriam.
Like the rest of them.
Devoured.

Now, generations later,
The smoke long cleared,
I carry her name.

"Miriam." Hebrew. "Rebellious,"
And yet, how could Miriam rebel?
How would she? How could she?
No voice to scream. No fists to fight.

I am bound to rebel where she could not.
I am bound to remember her,
and all the others who died with her
and all those who would have been born
for generations to follow
if only she had lived.

I am bound to speak for those muted by fear
To show strength for those who cannot.

I am bound to rebel
My name is Miriam.

Mountainsides

I swaddled you in dreams from birth
of health and happiness,

of honeysuckle days and lightning bug nights,
maybe someday Duke or Yale.

For now, your frame too tiny, too frail
for the massive canvas of colours

that would paint your life.
Cruising and crawling melted

into days of dangling from
paper-thin twigs on wintering trees.

But by the first snowflake of your
seventh year, your boots stood dry

in your closet while you lay in bed
for weeks drenched with fever. Illness

we did not understand robbed you
of school days and playground games,

biking, bowling, parties, and sleepovers
with friends. Poking and prodding, tests and

guesses were your life now, and finally
treatment with promise of snowy boots next winter.

Your sweet childhood was now your Everest,
with every crag and crevice a boulder, every

step an avalanche of fear, the distant peak
poking through greying clouds like

a beckoning finger, your damaged health
a relentless, blustery thunderstorm.

We didn't know the hardest part of climbing
was never reaching the top. Not really.

It was the sides.
It was always the sides.

my father's red car

my father's red car
a grand le mans,
shiny like wet paint,
fuzzy and warm inside
with that new car smell

he was so proud of me
ten weeks of lessons,
or was it eleven,
and now I was
finally ready
to graduate from
empty lots to streets
with my father beside me.

first, buckle in.
i knew that part.
that was easy.
then find the gas
pedal, to the left,
no, the right, then
the brake, that must
be the pedal, now
adjust the seat and
ready, set…oops,
the rearview mirror,
a tad up, a tad back,
perfect. now ready to drive.

pulling out of
my parking spot no
human targets or
parked cars, a
a little weaving,
probably wobbly
tires, yeah, that's it.
no sweat.

signal left, hesitate,
then proceed slowly,
slowly, and yield
onto a bigger street.

my father smiles.
leans back, his
shoulders relax.
he's in capable hands.

and then it happens
as if in a dream.
i turn onto the highway.
your life flashes before
your eyes, they say,
but not for me.

what flashed for me
was a light pole, like
a giant silver rolling pin
dropped on its side
flattening wildflowers
like pie dough.

in a blur of blue
flashes, a police
car screeches
next to us. my father
wasn't smiling anymore.

i'd never seen him cry
or a shiny red accordion
as big as a car.
"are you ok?" he asked.
talking to me or the car.
i wasn't certain.

there's nothing worse
than going out
for a driving lesson
in your father's
brand new
bright red car
and coming home
in a police car.

Letting Go

I was different from the start.
My head was too big.
She'll never live, mom was told.
I did.
She'll never walk or talk, mom was told.
I did.
But I wore my pain.
They called me pumpkin head.
They called me an alien,
like the ones you see in old movies.
They tapped me on my head in class.
No one saw. No one believed me.
No one will want me, I thought.
But someone did.
My husband, My soulmate.
He didn't care, he said.
But I carried the pain.
I was told I'd have no children.
But I did. Two healthy sons.
But I carried the pain.
The pain of a pumpkin head.

And then I saw myself.
In a simple, sweet painting
at the MoMA.
I didn't laugh at her.
I didn't judge her.
I didn't touch her head.
And surrounding me were people.
Including children.
They weren't laughing. Or pointing.
They asked their parents about her.
They smiled at her beauty.

And I did, too.

Curtain Call

The curtains open, footlights burn bright.
I can barely see critics furiously jotting
grand reviews, a far cry from the little
girl alone in her bathroom, hairbrush mic
in hand, on a black-and-white tile floor stage,
plastic shower curtain like the velvet one
parted for the singer I was meant to be,
with an audience of one — two if you counted
my mirrored self in a cloud of steam that
looked like dry ice rising with diva flair.

Applause sinks into silence;
my bathroom voice bursts, tears trickling down
my cheeks like the last rhythmic drips of the faucet,
with crescendos that would have made my house shake.

I can hear gasps as I reach Streisand highs
and Fitzgerald lows, my flowing sequined
dress, the color of beige roses and Dove soap.
Shouts of "Bravo" explode as I bow and swells of
"Encore" beckon for one last song; I feign humility
as I wend my way backstage through the barrage
of hugs and air kisses, paparazzi flashes and
questions, wanting nothing more than to rest my
laurels among the flowers crowding my dressing room.

Empty Chairs

Through the lens of a child, I see an aunt
who pinches cheeks until they burn,

kids whine endlessly with grumbling stomachs
and glasses of water just won't do,

where wobbly tables are separate for toddlers to teens.
who are hushed for outbursts of laughter

while grownup chatter hums like a dentist's drill.
And why was it taking them so long to dine?

I try to smile at a grandfather who bellows tired tales
of trudging six miles to school in five feet of snow.

Through the lens of an adult, I now see those times
as nothing more than a soundtrack of youth.

The grandfather's gone now, the aunt is, too. Cousins click
coast to coast family updates and news

while at home, our forks clink against china dishes
in the silence of empty chairs.

The Caller

I don't know how long I'd been there,
sitting on my front steps, staring at

the stain on my left shoe, the sky's
tiny raindrops dripping like a leaky

faucet, darkening the stain, my arm
hair, too, wondering if he would

notice it…this boy who'd called,
said he'd heard I was cute, wanted

to meet me. None of the other girls
had arm hair. The screen door squeaked

open again, echoed like the high-pitched
string of a child's violin that lingers long

after the song is over. "It's a prank. Please
come in." I could hear mom's eyes roll,

see her left eyebrow raise as it always
did when she could not speak her pain.

I stared up the street, as if in the haze
of a genie's third wish, a car would appear.

Maybe he was lost, had run out of gas, had
forgotten where I lived. Mom's "I told you

so's" clanked in my ears as drizzle turned to
fat tears…all the times in school hallways,

when I was sandwiched between bells by
giggling girls with guys' arms draped around

them, whispering and whistling as I passed,
flicking my head; I, swallowing fear the size

of a blood orange in my throat. I hated school.
I plucked the petal of a drooping lilac at my

feet, crumpled its innocent beauty, letting
it drizzle onto the smudge and retreated in from

the rain careful not to squeak the door, quiet as
death, removed my shoes, dried my arm hair,

crawled into bed, swaddling myself in my blankets.
Mom's gentle voice called "Are you ok?" sounding

like warm tea. I closed my eyes, counting the days
until graduation and waiting for the phone to ring.

Medical Maze

I'm a rat trapped in a medical maze
of health plans I can't afford
in print too tiny to read
in code words meant
for the keen eyes of a spy.

I am a rat trapped in a medical maze
where every turn's a detour
to yet another turn,
no end in sight,
no matter how sick I feel,
no matter how tired I am.
No matter how much my body
aches to stop and rest. I need
to keep going before the moon
eclipses the sun, offices close, phones
are turned off with bills yet to pay,
charges to contest, and no voice
to lead me to safety.

I remember summer trips to
a corn maze, where kids
chased daylight into dusk, their
laughs like the cackles of crows,
fading into the distance as they raced
for the exit, leaving me frozen,
afraid of the vulture of darkness.

And here I am again,
lost in a maze, abandoned
where no one sees me,
no one hears me, and
there is no way out.

Footsteps

They didn't hear the footsteps, not
at first. The street dark, hushed, just
the steady tapping of raindrops against
the asphalt. Hand in hand, they ambled

toward home, one immigrant, both gay,
celebrating a year of firsts, a life of forevers.
So much to plan before they married. Visas,
lawyers, whom to tell and when. How to piece

together joy in a broken world. But this was
New York, the haven of rainbows. Nothing
really mattered. Until they heard the footsteps,
sauntering at first, echoing their own, then

hastening. Their hands tightened, knuckles
whitened, knees buckling, footsteps neared
in lockstep with theirs, his tread splatting in the
now pounding rain. Their joy detoured toward

mortal fear. Their house in view, they bolted
like young colts for safety, locked themselves
indoors, and exhaled. Footsteps stopped at
the door. The knob turned slowly. Click. Click.

The deadbolt had been their defense and as
footsteps faded into the night, they knew there
was nothing left to say, nothing to do. Calling for help
would mean deportation, the severance of souls,

the end of a journey that had just begun. Time to sleep.
Another chance tomorrow to forge ahead as usual, go to
work, run errands, make phone calls, discuss wedding
plans…and steel themselves for footsteps along the way.

Through Open Doors

He didn't just walk in.
You opened the door,
welcomed him as you would
an old friend.

He had promises to keep…
to get rid of the roaches,
those Blacks, immigrants, gays, and Jews.
They weren't Christian whites, like you.

Was I alone in seeing jackboots
again seizing peace on the streets,
screaming slurs and raising torches,
searing fear in the hearts of victims
as white-hot as the brands they bore
on their arms not that long ago?
Was I alone in knowing that pain, too?

He promised money to the poor,
health care for the sick, and safety
for our children.
And you believed him.

While you sewed your curtains,
baked your brownies,
polished your silver and
planted your pretty flowers,
he was spreading seeds of hate.

You pray at church on Sundays.
What do you pray for?
I pray at my grandmother's grave,

spill tears for her family, her friends,
for all the Jews murdered
because of people
who opened the door for Nazis,
welcomed them like old friends.

We did not leave the door open
for this again. It is hard to close
the door with you on the other side.

My Cat and I

I remember the times
I'd settle in bed, a book
in my hands, blanketed

by the sweet silence of
night that would whisk
me away from the

stresses of day and my
eyelids would droop like
drapes as I gently slipped

into sleep, but that was before
our plush lump of a beast, our
cat, white as an unblemished field

of snow, with the low steady rumble
of distant thunder, the om of a
muddied day…my book, his pillow,

each new page, his dominion marked
with the whoosh of his full furry tail.
His nightly soundtrack of purrs drowning

my own efforts to read, my fingers
pushing his paws gently to reveal
words, his paws dancing with my fingers
in this shadowed tango of wills.

Two missions at bay, mine to read, his
to rest or play, that merged over time, but
only because I grew weary of trying to win.

Our cat's gone now.
No flying fur, no purring
to distract me, no paws
to cause me to lose my place.

Just my book and I.
Just my book and I.

The Mother I'd Known

There is nothing left now but bits
and bones of the mother I'd known.
Her hair once shiny and nicely styled,
smelling lemony with each morning hug,

now dirty, mousy gray, scraggly.
Hanging down to her knees like
an old curtain. It drapes one eye.
She reminds me of Veronica Lake,

I tell her. She stares at me blankly, this
woman who once watched movies with me,
shared memories of stars "back in the
day" when movies were better, she'd say.

"You tried to braid my hair," she accuses me,
this stranger's eyes glaring "I didn't, Mom."
My voice quivers and I am trapped in thoughts
of a 10-year-old child caught in a lie she

never told. My heart soars back decades, when
she braided my hair so tightly, so perfectly painful.
I would close my eyes, try to soak back tears, hoping
the ordeal would soon end, but dared not complain.

Even then, I knew looking nice was as vital to her as
breathing. She expected the same of me. Still, it was
torture. Seams didn't match. Pants were too baggy. Or
too tight. And what's that fleck no one saw but her?

I miss those days now. Her distorted mirror shattered,
her critical eye blinded by Alzheimer's. I long for
the days of painful braiding, lemony hugs and gushing
over old movie stars, favorite films. I'll still see her on

holidays she no longer knows and bring her flowers
she demands I take when I leave. Then I'll go home
and wait to hear when the vultures of Alzheimer's
have spit out her last bits of bones, now turned to dust.

Bubbe's Kitchen

No one lives in Bubbe's house now,
she's been dead for many years. The
neighborhood an empty lot, where kids
play dirtball past dark. But I can still see

her kitchen, its ash-gray walls peeled by time,
its shelves and shelves of earthenware canisters
of bruised tomatoes, crooked carrots, onions, stuff
dug from dirt. Jars of ginger and garlic. A bowl

of lemons. This was Bubbe's kitchen, the heart
of her American dream, where she could
store away pain of the Russian pogroms,
rejoice in freedom of a culinary soul once trapped

in cabinets of hatred, locked by Cossacks hunting
Jews. I can still hear her heavy voice, once silenced,
now belting Russian tunes while washing, peeling,
chopping, mincing, turning smelly dirt into fragrant meals

I couldn't wait to eat. No recipes, no Googling. Just a
sprinkle of this, a dash of that. Like her mother had done
in silence in their shtetl on Shabbat. I think of Bubbe's
kitchen now, where raw pain became a cuisine of strength.

Catnapped

Who rescued whom, I couldn't say. He
jumped on my shoulders, wound around

my neck like a wispy white boa with gray
Rorschach splotches. Clung to my collar

like Velcro until we came home, where
his crime spree began. He stole my

eyeglasses and hid them under our
bed, ate food we were eating, drank tea

we were sipping, shredded our calendar
June through September and a year later,

he wasn't ours. We were his. With winter's
first breath, Gizmo vanished. We searched

corners, crevices, closets, and the crawlspace,
combed bushes and yards, checked pounds,

vets, newspaper ads, posted signs on every pole,
but our efforts were like building a snowman in

the sun as any hope of finding Gizmo melted away.
After three days of not fighting for my food, we hired a

canine unit with the Schwarzenegger of dogs, a
strapping German Shepherd, with bleach-white teeth,

ears perked for duty. Twenty minutes later, she found
Gizmo, shaking, thin as a spare rib, but safe. I swaddled

and snuggled him, gave him food on my plate, water
from my glass and waited for him to tell me what to do next.

Honoring My Grandmother

I sit in the grass by my grandmother's grave
as I do every year, leave a stone, a Jew's way
to show respect. I feel our souls touch.

I speak to her, about family events she never saw,
great-grandchildren she never met. I tell her how
much I love her, miss her, and I leave fulfilled.

This year, I tell her I'm sorry she is forgotten…
her pain, her struggles, her terror, her arduous journey,
her American dream destroyed in a cyclone of hate,

where swastikas and slurs swarm like bees, effigies
hang like ornaments, and Nazi chants draw cheers.
This year I mourn for her and for all those like her.

I am sad for those who say get over it.
Wounds have left scabs that are being picked open.
I feel chilled, my spirit broken.

The stone of respect I left behind seems crushed
like the fragile bones of fledglings under
Nazi boots in fresh dirt.

Don't tell me to move on. Not yet.
Don't judge, listen.
Don't tell me you know. Hold my hand.

I want to feel protected. I want to feel safe.
My grandmother sacrificed more than you know
so I could live unafraid. She deserves that.

I do, too.

the butterfly angel

in this misty haven from an arctic wind
is the butterfly garden, with wings as
light as flakes, brushing shades of
roses, goldenrods, lilacs, and daffodils
against a frosted canvas window,

you wear your grandpa's cap,
faded gray and frayed by winters past,
the stale cold running through you even
now, four winters since his death.

a swallowtail's glass-stained wings
fold like origami, perches on
your cap and stays as if glued by
nectar as you move; your
laughter bursts like the beach sun.

when it's time to leave behind your
butterfly in our spring mirage, and return
to snow-capped sidewalks and streets,

you ask me if butterflies are angels,
like the legend says. i see your grandpa
in your dimpled smile and nod.

Hostess Without the Mostest

I should have known the job was not meant for me.
A restaurant hostess, I was short, dumpy, clumsy,

plain, that slippery stage at age sixteen, when a girl
tries to act older than she feels and only the mirror

reflects the truth behind the makeup; the head hostess,
an Aphrodite, long blond hair, mine kinky, unruly,

more like Medusa's minus the snakes, that would draw
stares cold as stone. She was not much older than I,

smooth curves, porcelain skin, her voice lovely, lilting,
mine crackled by nerves, welcoming customers ogling her.

Hungry people can be so mean. Aphrodite's job, to tell me
where to seat the starved; my job, to lead them in their suits,

pearls, and clicking heels through a labyrinth of tables,
white-knuckling menus in my hands while trying to complete

this Herculean task with all the strength of a wingless bird
before Aphrodite rescued me, showing that, yes, beauty and

brains can come in one package of perfection. Finally, success.
A table of eight for a party of four. Why hadn't I remembered that?

And an inviting pitcher of beer for a party who had no doubt worked up
a thirst. In my triumphant moment, I also forgot — Never separate tables

with a pitcher of beer in the middle. The shatter of glass echoed as if from
from a mountaintop into an endless valley below. An odd fusion of Pabst

and perfume filled the aired and the cacophony of cursing and cries from customers who had by then lost their appetite gave me the best tip ever.

Never work in a restaurant again.

Ever.

About the Author

Michele (Shelly) Hyatt-Blankman began writing stories and poetry from a very early age, beginning a lifelong interest in both. She expanded her interests to journalism at Marshall University, where she was a Graduate Teaching Assistant. Following years in public relations and copy editing, she now spends time at home with her husband Jon, a retired school teacher, trying to keep her pets out of trouble. She is also a proud mom of two sons: Richard, born 1984, and Joshua, born 1986, who live in New York and Texas, respectively.

In 1953, Michele was born with hydrocephalus. The disease resulted in a slightly enlarged head all of her life, but more disproportionate to her body when she was young. As a result, throughout school she was bullied and teased. In 2015, Michele and Jon visited their son Richard in New York City. They went with him to the Museum of Modern Art, where Richard called her attention to an untitled piece painted in 2000 by Yoshitomo Nara. In it, Nara painted one of his characteristically large heads. She laughed and posed in front of it. She felt at that moment she had gone full circle, some 59 years later. "Pumpkinhead" is based on the moment of seeing the portrait of a life she has since outgrown.